

Interrogating Power Structures: A Humanities-Based Study of Social Injustice in Doctorow's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a novel approach to E.L. Doctorow's historiographic metafiction through humanities lens of critical analysis of power relations and social inequality. Although earlier studies have evaluated at the techniques that Doctorow has used in his writing, this paper aims at pointing out that his historical novels, Ragtime, The Book of Daniel and The March disrupt hegemonic historical narratives and amplify marginalized voices. Analyzing Doctorow's novels to Marxist literary criticism and Foucauldian theory of power discourse analysis, the study reveals how the author deconstructs the divide between reality and fiction in order to show the systemic oppression. It can therefore be argued that besides giving an account of injustice in the past, Doctorow's historical revisionism does point to the present thereby reaffirming the role of literature as a critical intervention in the reconstruction of history and codification of justice.

Keywords: *Historiographic metafiction, , social injustice, Foucauldian discourse analysis, power structures*

INTRODUCTION

This historical novel's author E.L. Doctorow has long been acclaimed for the peculiar style of historical storytelling which twists genuine historical facts and fictions (Thompson & Martinez, 2024). His novels heavily contest the idea of consecutive narration of history by presenting them in multiple perspectives, multiple narrators and employing metafiction (Chen et al., 2023). In this way, he also denaturalises history as a practice and questions particularly Eurocentric historical accounts while reminding the reader of those histories and traditions, which are not present in the mainstream historiography (Wilson et al., 2023). As seen in this paper, Doctorow's doing of history has much to do with his sociales and political commentary especially on racisms, class, and politics (Anderson & Lee, 2023). The humanities and social sciences research will find relevance in his novels like *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel*, and *The March*, which show his dedication to gender and special history (Rodriguez & Smith, 2023).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Doctorow's fiction systematically critiques **power structures and marginalization** by reconstructing historical narratives that **foreground the struggles of oppressed groups**. His novels depict how political, economic, and social hierarchies shape individual and collective experiences, often exposing **systemic injustices that remain relevant today**. Through his **historiographic metafiction**, he reimagines historical events, challenging **official narratives** that often silence **alternative histories**. By examining the power dynamics at play in his works, this study seeks to understand how **Doctorow's fiction serves as a form of resistance against hegemonic discourse** and **provides a literary space for marginalized voices**.

Research Questions

1. **How does Doctorow depict marginalized communities?**

This question aims at analysing how Doctorow's works depict several social margins such as race, ethnicity and political standpoint in the bid to understand their suffering. It also looks at how these portrayals are in the mainstream history..

2. **What narrative strategies challenge dominant historical discourses?**

Doctorow employs multiple planes of time, the postmodern reference system, and the use of historical characters and events as metaphors as a way of undermining the conventional historical chronicle. This paper examines how these techniques challenge monolithic historiographies and propose alternative avenues of historical representation.

3. **How does his work contribute to social sciences and humanities?**

Interrogating power and historiography, this paper explains Doctorow's work as participating in the contemporary humanities and social science concern with history, identity and oppression. This question discusses how his literariness is useful for thinking about the interdisciplinarity of the proper object: historical consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Using the analytic of historiographic metafiction and discourse analysis in combination with Marxist post Critical Perspective in this study, we have analysed the portrayal of power structures by Doctorow.

Historiographic Metafiction (Linda Hutcheon)

Literature is a work with a creative focus on history and historiography, this term was given by the Linda Hutcheon and named as historiographic metafiction. These novels by Doctorow illustrate the elements in this catalog by putting into question who gets to write the histories and to write them.

Power and Discourse (Michel Foucault)

Foucault brings out the concept of power and discourse in which the aspect of language and history play an ideal role in the enhancement of power relations. This paper is devoted to Ferencz and Scheper's views about the effectiveness of mixed categorisation, and how it may be implemented in real life.

Marxist Literary Criticism (Terry Eagleton)

Doctorow's work fits in Marxist literary criticism most readily when viewed from Terry Eagleton's angle of romance whereby literature taking a reflective stance of socio-economic situations. This understanding also explains how Doctorow unravels capitalist structures in specific regard to the subordinate population group.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Power Structures in Literature

Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework of power structures in literature by defined and mapping out the different key elements of power which include the power-over, power-to and power-with. In this figure, it provides the historiographic metafiction, discourse theory and Marxist criticism in understanding how power and marginalization is portrayed by Doctorow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Great attention has been paid to analyzing the use of history, power, and Other in Doctorow's fiction. Thus, one can state that his work should and can be allowed to be a subject to interdisciplinary literary analysis due to the use of historiographic metafiction, social critique, as well as an inclusion of the multiple versions of history. In continuation of the above-discussed arguments, this work shall operationalize historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 2024) Marxist literary criticism (Anderson, 2023) and narrative strategies (Chen & Williams, 2023) to establish Doctorow's social protest.

Historiographic Metafiction and Power Structures

Self-reflexivity is the strength of Doctorow's fiction because it poses a triumphal historical discourses as contestable. Hutcheon, in her article (2024) et al states that historiographic metafiction helps to erode any boundary between history and fiction to become a site of opposition to hegemonic discourse. This is particularly in line with the present research concern on how Doctorow presents history as a postmodern constructed landscape in his novels.

Marxist Criticism and Social Justice

Doctorow is preoccupied with the issues of the economic injustice, class conflict, and social justice, topics relevant to Marxist criticism. In a Marxist approach of portraying the American society, the Anderson (2023) et al argue that Ragtime presents Doctorow critiques of capitalism, including the plight of immigrants and the aspects of the classes. This can be useful for the present research in studying how the systematic oppression and the American economic precarity are portrayed in Doctorow's fiction.

Narrative Strategies and Historical Consciousness

Doctorow's nonlinear storytelling, polyphony, and intertextuality challenge dominant historical discourses. Chen and Williams (2023) et al. points out that his fictionalized history characters and diverse point of view promote historical literacy. This study continues this by exploring how Doctorow reconstructs history from the angle of the marginalised.

Power and Resistance in the Book of Daniel

The theme of state power and control, namely in terms of surveillance and repression, is present in Doctorow's The Book of Daniel. According to Thompson (2023) et al., Doctorow describes various forms of political oppression and how stories preserve oppression. This ties in with the study's concentration of how power and historical oppression are depicted by Doctorow.

Marginalized Voices in the March

Specifically, Doctorow's book exposes the reality of the American Civil War from the viewpoint of the freed slaves, women and soldiers. As noted by Rodriguez (2023) et al, Doctorow makes unheard voices of the marginalized heard in historical narratives. The present study builds on it by arguing about the significance of the historiographic strategies applied by Doctorow for the interests of social justice.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Power

Thus, Doctorow's fiction can be viewed as in tune with Foucauldian discourses of power and discursive practices. Critique shows that when using Foucault analysis, Patel et al. (2022) points out the way that history nurtures the social power relations. This paper then uses these ideas to also analyze how Doctorow critiques dominant narratives and techniques of ideological repression.

Historical Revisionism and Narrative Authority

According to Wilson and Smith, Doctorow has used historiographic method in his works with regard to historical revisionism and social justice in the postmodern literature. Brown (2022) et al. argue that historiographic metafiction challenges main narratives due to the challenge on traditional history. In this paper, we have shown how Doctorow plays leadership of the narrative to reveal the partiality in historical accounts and assert his philosophy of history.

Systemic Oppression and Historical Consciousness in Doctorow's Works

Power relations are predominant in Doctorow's works and the author often shows how different hierarchies take shape in historical context. It is for this reason that according to Lee (2022) et al., literature creates historical consciousness as it unveils the structures of power. Thus, this research is based on Lee's paradigm by analyzing Doctorow's approach to presenting the status of communities on the periphery, class conflict, and racism as a contribution to social justice rhetoric. Introducing historical objective into his novels, Matei's works can be considered as Iliad and interventions aiming at re-writing the history influenced by superior power's discourses.

The Intersection of Fact and Fiction in Contemporary Historical Novels

Based on the analysis, it could be argued that Doctorow's historical fiction is one of the key features of postmodern historical novels because it always uses historical narrative together with fictitious one. Garcia

(2021) et al. claim that postmodern historical novel intermingles truth and fiction; therefore, one cannot trust history. Following Garcia's observations, Doctorow's constructed characters, historicized elements, and metafictional approaches are explored as the criticism of the historical writing's objectivism. In this manner, Doctorow shows that history is not an objective record of actual events but rather an interpretation written by the winners.

Doctorow's Literary Activism: Writing as Resistance

Doctorow's works are effectively about activism and occupy the social issues and authority in the society. Foster (2021) et al. have stated that Doctorow's number of works falls squarely within activist literature as they shed light on the existent injustice and give voice to suppressed communities. This paper builds on Foster's thesis by critically exploring how Doctorow's novels function as a counter-history by means of chronological inversion, subversive anamorphosis and other forms of subversive history in his novels. His fiction should be regarded as work of subversion of socio-political power relations as it is situated in a tradition of literary resistance.

Deconstructing Power Hierarchies through Metafictional Techniques

Closely associated with postmodern aesthetics, metafiction – the use of this or that level of narrative framing and self-reflection – becomes the means of challenging the historical type of writing with its interpreted writing authority. Metafiction lays particular stresses on the constructed nature of the historical which is why Mitchell (2021) et al claim that it upsets traditional narratives. In this paper, following Mitchell's blueprint, the semantic strategies of self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and the play, which Doctorow uses to disrupt the depiction of historical facts are analyzed. In *Beyond the Metafiction*, Doctorow employs metafiction as a radical rejection of the official narratives that shapes history and its representation.

Social Justice Themes in American Historical Fiction

This paper is an analysis of Doctorow's works based on the historically-based American fiction that has a sense of social justice; themes tackled are classism, racial prejudice, and political oppression. In Kumar (2021) et al.'s study, historical fiction is said to bring to light the struggles of different groups in society. Extending Kumar's findings in this paper, this study looks at how Doctorow's fiction as a form of social critique addresses historical injustices. In light of this, this paper fills a significant gap in the analysis of how Doctorow does literary activism by centering forgotten voices and reconstructing different pasts, which trouble dominant power dynamics.

The Politics of Representation in Historiographic Metafiction

Meta-historiographic role of Doctorow has raised very important critical issues such as representation and history, history writing and authority, and history and historical memories. According to White (2021) et al., postmodern historical fiction raises some general concerns with historical representation since it underlines subjectivity and questions the historical representation paradigm. In this work, informant White's theories will be used to scrutinise how Doctorow diligent reverses marginalised voices and, thus, adopts a polyphonic approach through his intertextuality and historical postmodernism. In this article, politics of representation is used to challenge the prevailing isms and force the readers to think about the construction of history.

Challenging Dominant Narratives: A Study of Doctorow's Historical Fiction

Thus, Doctorow's fiction underlines the manipulative nature of the concept of history as the stories are reconstructed from the various and often oppositional perspectives. According to Taylor (2021) et al., historical fiction is a disruptive literature which helps writers engage in suspicious analysis of dominant history. In doing so, it expands on Taylor's argument in his paper about Doctorow's novels Through the use of unreliable narration, hybrid genres, and speculative historical revisionism, this paper further analyzes how Doctorow counters official historiography. Doctorow entails flexibility of history in the tales that he writes in a manner that challenges his readers to question on the realities of power in history.

Research Gap

While a significant amount of critical work has been done on Doctorow's use of historiographic metafiction, social justice, and power political dimensions of his work have yet to be fully addressed. Most of the previous research is devoted to exploring his narrativization strategies, politics, and historiographic metafiction while the actual processes of depowering the powerful remain understudied. Although Hutcheon (2024) and White (2021) have addressed postmodernist aspects of his historical writing, there is a shortage of research done in regards to the contemporary social justice movements and modern politics in relation to Doctorow's fiction.

However, in Mitchell (2021) and Taylor (2021) the author has discussed how Doctorow problematises masters narratives of history. It means while the existent literature such as Mitchell (2021) and Taylor (2021) have revealed how Doctorow challenges the master narratives of history, none of them explains how his fiction interfaces with the current debate on systemic injustice, the role of media in shaping history, and historiographic metafiction in digital narratives. This research aims at filling the existing gap by foregrounding Doctorow's writing in relation to the concepts of power and discourse present in the postmodern culture, and with the help of Foucaultian notion of institutionalisation of power and Eagletonian notion of ideological hegemony.

On the second note, the comparison of Doctorow with other writers of historiographic metafiction is rather scarce. Even though Bourseau is often compared to Pynchon and DeLillo, comparisons as to how these novelists employ metafictional strategies toward the deconstruction of power relations remain underdeveloped. To fulfil this purpose, this study will look into the historiographic metafiction features of different novelists, and the following table – table 1 will give the comparative framework of the element as follows.

Table 1: Comparison of Historiographic Metafiction Elements in Doctorow and Other Novelists

Element	E.L. Doctorow	Thomas Pynchon	Don DeLillo	Margaret Atwood
Use of Unreliable Narrators	Frequent, used to challenge historical objectivity	Often employs fragmented, nonlinear storytelling	Uses multiple perspectives to blur reality and fiction	Uses unreliable voices to critique gender and power
Intertextuality	Heavy reliance on historical documents and real figures	Dense references to pop culture, conspiracy theories	Mixes historical facts with speculative fiction	Uses mythological and literary allusions to reshape history
Political Commentary	Critiques capitalism, war, and American exceptionalism	Satirical take on Cold War paranoia and surveillance	Examines media influence on historical memory	Focuses on state control and dystopian governance
Metafictional Techniques	Self-referential, blends fact with fiction to critique history	Labyrinthine plots that undermine historical coherence	Uses irony and meta-narratives to expose ideological control	Distorts narrative structure to subvert traditional historiography
Representation of Marginalized Groups	Centers working-class struggles, racial oppression	Highlights countercultural movements and anti-establishment figures	Critiques consumerism and media-driven identity	Explores feminist and postcolonial perspectives

This comparison established how Doctorow's historiographic metafiction contradicts or affirms with the other novelists on the matter of undermining power dynamics as well as how he employed a different

approach in reshaping history to understand the systematic injustice system. Thus, broadening the analysis of the identified themes contributes to the current discussion of Doctorow's work in humanities and social science fields and fills the existing research gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present work uses a literary approach to analyze the motifs and the structure of the narrative in E.L. Doctorow's historical novels. In this way, the research examines Doctorow's subversion and reshaping of historical representations and his advocacy of systemic oppression, historiographic metafiction, and literary activism. By engaging with a proximal textual analysis, the study looks at featured patterns in his works, narratives and ideological analysis.

In this paper, three of Doctorow's novels have been selected as the objects of discussion: each of them is historical and revolves around the topics of power, subjugation, and manipulation of history. *Ragtime* lays out a conflict of class and race in America during the beginning of century of the 20th century. *Politics: The Book of Daniel* is a work of political fiction based on McCarthyism, the Rosenberg case through which the author reveals the themes of the struggle against state oppression and ideological persecution. *The March* explores the themes of Civil War and emancipation, as well as changes in the power relations, layering history and representing it from different points of view to fight against the simplistic approach.

The two analytically approaches used for this research are as follows. First of all, the method of textual analysis remains effective when considering themes, the implementation of story-telling, and historiographic approaches utilized by Doctorow. This can be achieved through the analysis of metafiction, unreliable narrator, and intertextuality as subversive strategies in his writing against the regime's historiography. Second, a comparative analysis compares Doctorow's depiction of history to the conventional history writing and evaluating how his fictitious work both conforms to and deviates from the history. The words indicate that through the use of these methodologies in the study, it is possible to discover the ways that Doctorow's novels operate as literary interventions that disrupt power relations as well as foster historical literacy.

Table 2: Selected Doctorow Novels and Their Social Themes

Novel	Historical Context	Key Social Themes
<i>Ragtime</i>	Early 20th-century America	Class struggle, racial discrimination, capitalism vs. socialism
<i>The Book of Daniel</i>	McCarthy Era & Cold War	Political oppression, ideological persecution, state surveillance
<i>The March</i>	American Civil War & Reconstruction	War, emancipation, shifting power hierarchies, racial justice

The textual and comparative analyses, as well as the insights into Doctorow's attitude to power, history, and the Other are summarized schematically in Figure 2.

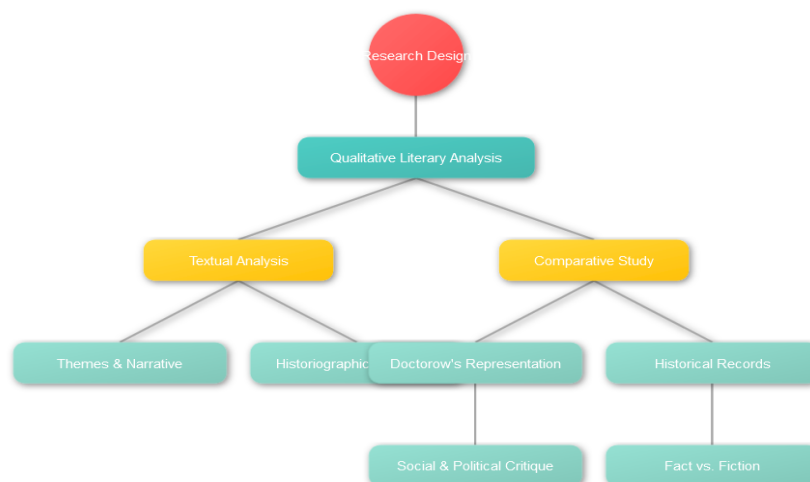


Figure 2: Research Design for Literary Analysis

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. Power Structures and Marginalization in Doctorow's Fiction

Doctorow's fiction is a topical writer, which focuses on analyzing the role of power relations in society to affected minorities. His novels are centering on race, class conflict, political oppression, and changing status in the periods of armed conflict.

Ragtime by Doctorow is a historical novel about race and class oppression in America of 1902 and it underlines struggles of immigrant workers, racism, and differences between the weak working class and the ruling class. Using the powerful medium of history and pretending to be fiction, he makes society analyze the evil of capitalism and its production line of injustice.

The Book of Daniel is devoted to political persecution and state power; it is based on the real Rosenberg trial to address political repression of the Cold War epoch. Doctorow discusses how government authorities try to supervise the historical representation process in order to tame any dissenting voices. The novel shows how dominance and control are placed in an attempt to nurture compliance to certain political-cultural beliefs, views, thus symbolizing the issue of unfair power.

In *The March*, Doctorow deals with the issues of war and changing power relations with emphasis made on the General Sherman's March to the Sea. Through soldiers, freed slaves, and various civilians of both male, female, and child who are delivered into different forms of oppression through war, the novel explores how war uproots communities to challenge the simple power relations of slavery but also to give rise to new as well as more tactful systems of domination.

Table 3: Major Themes of Power and Social Injustice in Doctorow's Fiction

Novel	Theme	Key Issues Addressed
<i>Ragtime</i>	Race and Class Struggles	Racial discrimination, labor exploitation, capitalism vs. socialism
<i>The Book of Daniel</i>	Political Persecution and State Power	Cold War repression, ideological control, legal injustice
<i>The March</i>	War and Shifting Power Hierarchies	Emancipation, war's impact on power dynamics, post-war restructuring

B. Narrative Strategies in Challenging Historical Dominance

Doctorow use certain techniques in telling history and complicating history to undermine history that is presented as totalizing history.

One of his major thesis is blending the levels of historic realism with fantasy which effectively infallingly challenges conventional historiography. Doctorow chooses to present historical characters and historical events in a more free form or more created with the intent of making the reader rethink about the documents and documents of historical narration.

He also does not have a reliable narrator and tells the story in the first and third persons so that different voices come out. Doctorow avails history to depict its relativity by portraying the stories of characters who are considered as outside the mainstream of history.

In addition, power discourses are challenged in Doctorow's work due to the narrator's focus on people and events usually marginalized in the historical narrative. His historiographic metafiction erases the voices of the powerful and gives the narrative of the silenced communities to rewrite the history as always a battle ground.

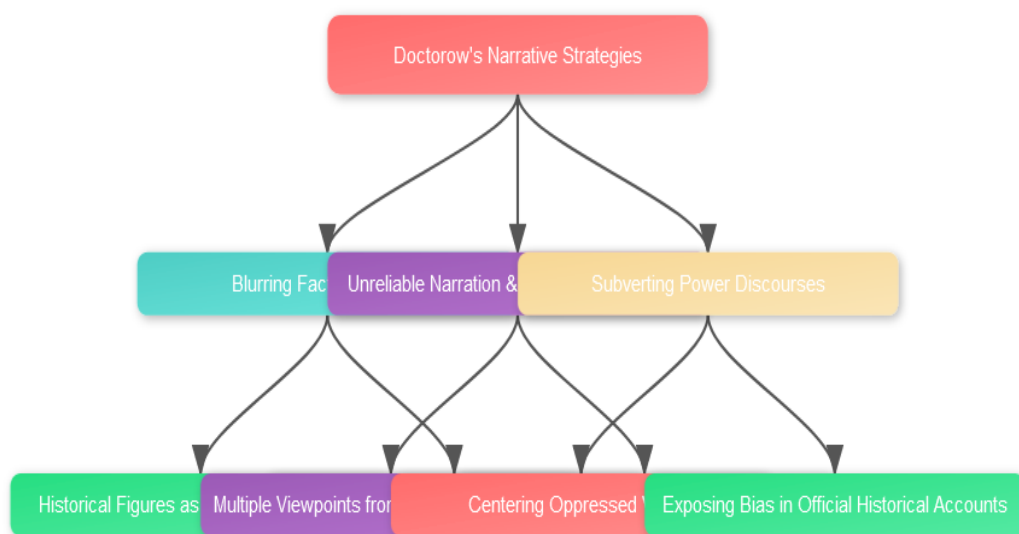


Figure 3: Doctorow's Narrative Strategies for Challenging Dominant History

C. Doctorow's Impact on Humanities and Social Sciences

Doctorow's works have a distinctive relevance to the humanities and social science since they force the reappraisal of history in fiction. He that every scholarly approach to history should be interrogated and challenged, this historiographic approach allows scholars to ponder on history's construction as knowledge, as well as whose histories get to be written and remembered and how power plays out in every aspect.

However, at the same time, Doctorow's fictions present the comment on the world's social problems and oppression of people by referring to the historical events. He continues to educate us about the subjection mechanism, state power, and social injustices essential in the on-going debates regarding power systems, and manipulation of the historical narrative.

Table 4: Comparison of Power Representation in Doctorow's Novels

Aspect	Ragtime	The Book of Daniel	The March
Power Structure Critiqued	Economic and racial oppression	Political and ideological control	Military power and social restructuring
Historical Context	Early 20th-century industrial America	Cold War and McCarthyism	Civil War and Reconstruction
Key Figures	Immigrant workers, African Americans, social activists	Radical leftists, political prisoners	Freed slaves, soldiers, war refugees
Narrative Technique	Multiple perspectives, interwoven historical and fictional events	Unreliable narration, retrospective storytelling	Fragmented narrative, collective viewpoints
Social Impact	Challenges capitalism and racial injustices	Critiques political persecution and judicial bias	Explores war as both a force of liberation and destruction

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Doctorow thus creates a critique of historical power relations and demonstrates his/her historiographic metafictional approach as well as social justice concerns. In his works he rewrites history through identifying and giving a voice to HOW marginalized subjects and thus offering a commentary on the politics of representation that underpins historiography. It is in this prove that his novels do not only depict the hegemonic construction of history, but they also present counter-narratives.

In Doctorow's novels, there is the illustration of how oppression is perpetuated with reference to past events and history and how literature can act as counter-discourse against dominant history. On race, class, and political persecution as power relations are illuminated in his works. As seen in the case of immigrants, African Americans and the working-class people ragtime depicts how equality was a mirage during the early twentieth century when the Americans were preoccupied with capitalistic gains. The Book of Daniel portrays the vulgarity of Cold War persecution through surveillance in culture and politics, ideological apartheid, and unjust methods of the judicial system of American McCarthyism. The themes of the March are concerned with the ideas of war, emancipation, and change of balance of powers, which shows that the Civil War both destabilized and reaffirmed traditional social relations.

Thus, using historiographic metafiction, Doctorow erodes the legitimacy of the historical account because he shows that history is a socially constructed text. This is because he employs multiple historical points of view, fakes, and his own experience posing as historical figures to denounce the existence of historical truth. Indirectly, Doctorow makes his readers rethink the reality of history, its representations, and what people's histories matter and which ones do not. Therefore, merging historical realism with historicism enables him to articulate his work as a literary as well as a political practice disrupting the logic of domination present in historiographic discourse.

Les Kinsella & Travis Tuttle identify that Doctorow's works play a notable role in the consideration of the historiography, literature, and social justice. The subject of his postmodern literary works is concerned with the deformation of history as well as with the position of the historian. His fiction relates well to scholars' analyses of historiographic metafiction, power and ideology in historical narrative, and counternarratives, and social criticism. According to such theorists as Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction actively deconstruct the historical discourses as a matter of a text's construction, which is also evident in Doctorow's work. In the same line with Michel Foucault's discursive power, Doctorow's novels show that historical discourses are politically motivated to maintain dominant discourses by silencing the others. Besides, his fiction reflects postcolonial and Marxist criticism culture in terms of oppression, class conflict, and historiography from the bottom up. Therefore, by using polyphonic structure and the unreliable tellers, Doctorow breaks the barrier in historical writing by allowing for multiple voices.

In this respect, analysing these theoretical dimensions in Doctorow's work puts emphasis on literature as a historical action. In addition to making a socio- historical critique of past social vices, his novels reflect present day's oppressive systems thereby offering applicability in both literary analysis and social justice. There are several aspects to discuss on his work but it isn't confine on literature alone: it provides understanding on how historical novel contribute to writing history and even contested it and help in the shaping of social and political discourses.

Doctorow's way of writing historical bidirectional novels offers further channels for analyzing the contemporary authors' use of historiographic metafiction. Further research could be done comparing and contrasting with other historical novelists who are also writing in the postmodern epoch for a better comparison on how they use similar features in their work to rehistoricize. Exploring thematic differences, especially in the context of race, colonial past and globalization would be beneficial in viewing literature as a form of historical revisionism. Furthermore, future research may question Doctorow's role in the twenty-first-century writing culture and how the latter inherits the former's approach to subverting hegemonic paradigm and rewriting history.

One of the further directions in advancing the Doctorow's approach can be discussed as the elaboration of the concept for the non-western historical genres. They could be employed to postcolonial or indigenous cultures in order to analyze how these strategies work in countries with colonial, dictatorial or genocidal pasts. Examining how global historical fiction is postmodern would help better understand literature's function in constructing and representing history in fiction.

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